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Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison

Article *in* Hespéris tamuda / Université Mohammed V., Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines · April 2020

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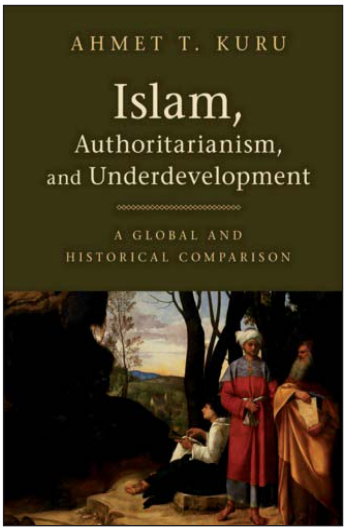

Ahmet T. Kuru.- ***Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*** **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 316 p.**

Why did the West rise and the Muslims retreat? What went wrong? Why have Muslims failed to develop a real democracy and an innovative economy? And, more importantly, why Muslims are retrogressive, not progressive? These questions are frequently asked and hotly debated in the Muslim world among both intellectuals and laymen. Generations of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have puzzled over why the Muslim world, once intellectually creative and commercially vibrant, fell behind economically and scientifically and came to symbolize corrupt and oppressive governance. They have adopted diverse approaches in excavating and detecting the origins and reasons behind the Muslims' economic underdevelopment and intellectual stagnation. Some thinkers blame Islam as a religion as the source of the problem, whereas others believe that certain Islamic practices, the politicization of Islam, and the radical and literal interpretations of the Quran are the leading causes of Muslims' intellectual inertia and economic decline. Historians and scholars such as Abdellah Laroui, Abdelmajid Kaddouri and Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri claim that since the late Middle Ages, the Muslim states have been unable to understand the global economic, intellectual and technological transformations due to the fact that the Muslim thought has been deeply seated in tradition and monotony. They add that Muslims have been obsessed with their glorious past and tradition, not keeping pace with the scientific and intellectual breakthroughs witnessed by Western societies during the same period. Abdellah Laroui, in particular, thinks that the basis of underdevelopment in the Muslim world is the absence of historical consciousness.

Ahmet T. Kuru's *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* is an invaluable contribution to the ongoing debate about the roots and reasons of backwardness and tyranny in the Muslim world. The key aim of Kuru's book is to respond to the often-posed question: why have Muslim-majority countries suffered from economic underdevelopment and exhibited a high level of authoritarianism compared with their Western counterparts? One of the strengths of the book lies in the author's multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach in dealing with this

heated issue. For Kuru, neither Islam nor Western colonialism is the culprit. He contends that Islam itself and Western colonialism do not fully explain the problems of Muslims' backwardness and contemporary challenges. He maintains that Islam cannot be rebuked for the Muslim world's failures very simply because thanks to Islam and Muslims' intellectual creativity, dynamism and opening up to other civilizations, the Muslim world, between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D. enjoyed a long period of socio-economic and philosophical accomplishments, which demonstrates Islam's compatibility with progress and science. He admits that "European colonization was a major impediment to the success of Muslims' reforms (224)," during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Kuru rightfully affirms that when Muslim-majority countries were on the eve of being invaded by the white man in the nineteenth century, they had already been in a sorry state devastated by poverty and a lack of national pride and self-confidence.

The author invites us to do a kind of auto-criticism/self-critique by going beyond the politics of blame and delving deeply into history to pinpoint the roots of modern-day underdeveloped and autocratic countries in the Muslim world. In fact, Kuru's argument seems to be insightful and provocative in that the genealogy of Muslim-majority states' authoritarianism, underdevelopment, and violence dates back to the mid-ninth century when the ulema-state alliance sidelined and repressed independent intellectuals and the merchant class. Put differently, Kuru argues that from the eighth to the mid-twelfth century, the Muslim world experienced many scholarly and economic advancements due to two dynamic classes: bourgeoisie and scholars. These two creative classes were financially independent from state authorities and constituted the bedrock of Muslim philosophical and economic successes. But something went wrong in the second part of the eleventh century, exemplified by malicious complicity and alliance of a clique of orthodox Islamic scholars, the *ulema*, with the military elites against the bourgeoisie and philosophers. This conservative and anti-intellectual partnership of religious scholars with state military officials had put an end to one of the golden eras in human history and marginalized the enlightening creative Muslim minds. That is how Muslims lost their intellectual and commercial dynamism. In brief, the ulema-state ever-lasting marriage led to both intellectual and economic stagnation and contributed to the emergence of a vicious circle of violence, autocracy, and primitiveness in the Muslim-majority states. This situation has continued up until the present day.

Obviously, Ahmet T. Kuru's book is a crucial contribution to the understanding of the stagnation, fundamentalism, and disorder that has swept the Islamic world. It is divided into two parts. The first part explores how the *ulema* and the authoritarian states have contributed to problems of violence, authoritarianism, and underdevelopment in many Muslim countries today. He affirms that the issue of violence in the Muslim world cannot be fully grasped without examining the problem of authoritarianism in several Muslim societies. Against those who associate Islam with terrorism, Kuru emphasizes that violence exists in all religions, and instead of reprimanding religions, it is the religious practices of people that are based on radical interpretations of the scriptures that need to be criticized and condemned. This indicates that we should distinguish between religion and religiosity. For example, Salafist ideologies such as Wahhabism and Sufi orders like Tijaniyya are not religions but rather religiosities; that is, various readings and understandings of the Quran and Hadiths. A secular and liberal scholar interprets the Islamic texts from secular and liberal lens and a Salafist scholar reads the same texts literally and adheres to a tradition-based interpretation of Islam. Unfortunately, enlightening and rational readings of religious texts are dismissed and demonized by the ulema-state alliance while fundamentalist explanations have prevailed in the Muslim world because the *ulema* "focus on protecting the tradition rather than producing new ideas (30)." Indeed, this intellectual bankruptcy and the *ulema's* monopoly of religious affairs as well as the violence and authoritarianism in the Muslim-majority states have deeper historical and socio-economic roots.

The second part, however, sheds light on how the ulema-state partnership started to crystalize and their peripheralizing of bourgeoisie and intellectuals after the eleventh century. Owing to merchants and scholars, as the writer succinctly puts it, Muslim civilization had a glorious and rich intellectual, economic and scientific triumphs between the eighth and eleventh centuries, but gradually lost its progressive legacy due to the complicity of *ulema* with the military elites against a dynamic mercantile bourgeoisie and a vibrant intelligentsia. Muslims lost their intellectual momentum and economic progress and could not restore it until the present.

Adopting a comparative historical approach, through his book, Kuru analyzes in detail how the post-eleventh-century Muslim empires such as the Ottoman, the Safavid, and the Mughal failed to attain scientific, intellectual, technological and economic revolutions comparable to their contemporary Western states. What can be inferred from Kuru's work is that the eleventh century was a watershed in the history of both Western and Muslim civilizations.

It signaled the birth of Western civilization and the decline of the Muslim one. It is ironic to discern that the marginalization of merchants and philosophers in the Muslim world coincided with the evolution of a dynamic merchant class and the rise of universities in Western Europe. Western Europe, therefore, engulfed in a web of turmoil and religious wars and dominated by military feudalist rulers and the Catholic clergy, was far behind the Muslim world in terms of science, knowledge, and economy. Yet, after the eleventh century, the West experienced the establishment of universities and the emergence of city-states, resulting in the rise of two influential classes: bourgeoisie and intellectuals. These two classes saved Europe from darkness and introduced it to light through the Renaissance, the printing revolution, geographical discoveries, and the scientific revolution. Interestingly, when Christianity was reformed, secularized and put in the private realm in the West, Islam was hijacked, politicized and put at the service of authoritative states in the Muslim world.

According to Kuru, deploying Islam as a political tool is one of the principal causes of underdevelopment and authoritarianism in the Islamic world. It is also to be noted that in the West the revolution in religious thinking was conterminous with the revolution in scientific thinking, laying solid foundations for a good governance and economic prosperity. In a Muslim context, in contrast, the eleventh century heralded the erosion of the Muslim golden age. Since the eleventh century, the Muslim world was ruled by many powerful Muslim empires such as the Ottoman, the Savafid, and the Mughal. In spite of their military power, these empires suffered from "substantial intellectual and economic handicaps, which led to their eventual decline (203)." More bluntly stated, the only thing that the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires borrowed from the West is gunpowder. While the army leaders understood the significance of gunpowder, they did not take the printing machine and the Western scientific revolutions seriously. Muslims no longer had an intellectual or bourgeois class who would realize the value of the printing press. What makes the matter worse is that the *ulema* considered the printing machine as a threat to their religious monopolization, encouraging a traditional religious education that was based on memorization and repetition.

It is telling that Ahmet T. Kuru's *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment* is a great achievement and an added value to the wide and diverse literature on the crisis of Islam and the descent of autocracy in the Muslim-majority states. However, Kuru's argument is not new. It was put forth by Mahmoud Ismail, a professor of Islamic history at Ain Shams University in Egypt, in his *Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Islamic Thought*

published in the 1990s. In effect, Ahmet T. Kuru's book remains an immense and significant contribution to the understanding of the deep roots and causes of the quagmire in which the Muslim world is floundering. It helps us to better comprehend the real reasons that have turned the Muslim world upside down from the hub of economic and intellectual advancements to the hot spot of breaking news of violence, corruption and tyranny. At the end of Kuru's book, any reader might raise many questions that need immediate answers. Why do the *ulema* today insist on justifying the rulers' injustice to the people and giving them tricks and thoughts to hide their corruption and injustice? Why do they demonize and threaten those who seek renewal and creativity in solving the problems of Muslims? How long shall we wait for both the *ulema* and independent intellectuals to forget the past wounds and work in tandem for the common good of their peoples?

One of the most important conclusions that can be drawn from the book is that *ijtihad* (exegesis) is the key to modernity in Islamic societies. Without doubt, Kuru's book is a must-read study and a pivotal source for students and scholars of political sciences, Islamic thought and history, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, area studies, Islam-West encounters and interdisciplinary studies.

Abdelaziz El Amrani
Abdelmalek Essaadi University of Tetuan
Morocco

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